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Hamburger Hill- The Battle of Dong Ap Bia

On 10 May 1969, forces from the 101st Airborne Division began a fight for control over the A Shau valley, designated as Operation Apache Snow. Fighting was especially fierce at Dong Ap Bia, a mountain in the valley. After ten days and hundreds of casualties, the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division took control of the hill. A ridge of Dong Ap Bia, Hill 937, torn up by the battle, strewn with so many dead and wounded, was christened with the name Hamburger Hill. This is the story of the battle.

The A Shau valley was known for its vicious fighting and its danger. For years, a goal for the U.S. military was to gain control of the area. By placing a base there, the military brass thought the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) would not try to attack the city of Hue. If the North Vietnamese took control of the valley, it would also serve as a major tactical base for the NVA. Five divisions of the U.S. Army would fight the battle for control of A Shau. Among those, the 101st Airborne Division, considered by many to be one of the best fighting divisions, was thought to be the force to finally gain control of the valley. The allied assault would be fighting the “Pride of Ho Chi Minh,” who specialized in “killing American soldiers.”¹ The 29th NVA Regiment would fight to their death to maintain control of the A Shau valley. The fierceness of the NVA was well-known; many U.S. soldiers balked at the thought of fighting in the valley.

The 3/187th hit the landing zone (LZ) at 0710 10 May. Expecting a “hot LZ,” Lt. Col. Weldon Honeycutt was surprised when it went uncontested. Dong Ap Bia, considered to be “a way station for the transshipment of supplies between the nearby enemy base area 611 and the myriad of high-speed trails on the valley floor,” was to be secured and protected against NVA aggression.² In order for Dong Ap Bia to be controlled by the U.S., the various ridges and hills were to be attacked by American forces. The 3/187th was to secure the large ridge to the southwest, called Hill 937.

Alpha and Delta Companies began their Reconnaissance-in-Forces (RIF) soon after the landing. The soldiers found enemy huts, supplies, and even smoldering campfires. Although it became apparent that the 3/187th landed in a large enemy base they were nonetheless optimistic. The uncontested landings and the absence of the NVA reinforced the feeling that this task was going to be a piece of cake. As one soldier said, “...The job of securing that mountain for a battalion CP would be like going on R and R. Like everyone else, I was really looking forward to a nice easy week up there.”³

Bravo Company, however, met resistance. After advancing three hundred and twenty meters, the soldiers were attacked by NVA throwing Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG). Three soldiers were wounded in the attack, and the company retreated when airstrikes were called in. The planes dropped 500-pound drag bombs, flattening the area for one hundred meters. Too late in the night to check the damage done by the bombs, Bravo Company formed a night defensive perimeter (NDP) and settled down for an uneasy night.

On May 11, Lt. Col. Honeycutt discovered information that he had been seeking: the strength of the NVA regiment in the area. It was between twelve hundred to eighteen

hundred men, and growing, all hidden deep into the ridges and caves of Dong Ap Bia. These soldiers of the 29th Regiment had “explicit orders to kick the shit out of some American unit in these mountains.”⁴ The NVA was looking for a big fight, and Honeycutt was only happy enough to give it to them.

That day Bravo Company was once again on the move. Finding dead NVA soldiers, blood trails, and abandoned gear, the pointman in the patrol became very cautious. Leaving such trails behind was very unusual for the NVA. He proceeded very slowly, unsure of what was happening or would happen. Soon the company ran into sniper fire, which disappeared as quickly as it came. Alpha Company, continuing their RIF, ran into one of the fabled NVA “superhighways,” a hard road wide enough for trucks and transports. The road was well protected, the canopy of the trees above woven together, making it invisible from the sky. After following the road for a while, the soldiers found something that was becoming common- recently abandoned huts and campfires. Obviously the American forces had entered enemy territory.

At the same time, the 3rd platoon of the Alpha Company was attacked by the NVA. Although there were no casualties during the shoot-out that ensued, the soldiers were unnerved by the bloody violence. 2nd platoon also had enemy contact, finding intense sniper fire. The pointman was killed, along with another soldier. By the time the airstrikes were called in, three men were dead and seven wounded. Lt. Col. Honeycutt, unaware of the airstrikes, found his battalion Command Position (CP) attacked by the gunships. This friendly-fire killed two men and wounded thirty-five others. To add to these problems, the NVA attacked the CP with 120 mm heavy mortar rounds.

Later in the night, three soldiers were sent out to retrieve two M60 machine guns. They recovered the guns, and one reported: “There are gooks all over the place, Captain. And I mean a lot of them. And they aren’t any damn trail watchers. These bastards are NVA regulars. I could hear ‘em talking and moving all over up there.”⁵ These incidents all indicated that the preconceived notion that this task would be a “piece of cake” was a fallacy. The A Shau valley was a NVA base, with many soldiers ready to fight to the death to keep the valley, Dong Ap Bia, and Hill 937.

The next morning, on 12 May, the 1st platoon of Bravo Company began their RIF. They soon happened upon an enemy bunker. The soldiers attacked, and the NVA returned the attack with machine guns and RPGs, the conflict being especially fierce. “Lieutenant Boccia had never experienced fire either as heavy or as concentrated in one area as this.”⁶ The bullets and grenades shattered everything around the soldiers, who found themselves hugging the ground. The fighting was so intense that the company was forced to retreat to the NDP held the night before. Charlie Company did not meet as much resistance as Bravo did, but did find snipers, who, while not causing any damage or casualties, unnerved the soldiers and put them on edge.

A LZ was to be constructed for Bravo Company, which had advanced several hundred meters away from the battalion CP. Too far away to return for supplies, a LZ was to be made to resupply the soldiers. When the helicopters tried to lower the engineers down through the canopy, they were attacked by enemy fire. The Americans then bombed the entire area very heavily for hours, each of the five battalions in the A Shau valley lending air support and artillery to the strike. The 2nd platoon of Bravo Company was then ordered to push through a clearing to reach this LZ, but was attacked

by the NVA. The soldiers had no recourse but to withdraw. The other companies were also having trouble, getting ambushed or needing to withdraw as a result of the intense firefights. Lt. Col. Honeycutt realized that the companies were not in position for his plan of a “multicompany push against the mountain.” The soldiers found much more resistance than ever thought, and the eventual attack would have to be put off for an indeterminate amount of time.⁷

Charlie Company was ambushed on 13 May during a RIF. This halted an operation by Bravo Company, who were sent to aid Charlie Company. Because of the ferocity of the ambush, airstrikes were called in. The bombers, hitting the exact spots marked for them, nonetheless hit soldiers of Bravo Company with shrapnel, killing one soldier and wounding others. As the day wore on, the soldiers encountered sniper fire, which intensified as they pushed through the jungle. One by one, though, the Americans killed the snipers. Then all at once, twenty to thirty NVA attacked Bravo Company, throwing RPGs and grenades. Although the NVA attacked and retreated, the firefight lasting but a few seconds, this was another indication that “there were a lot of NVA on Dong Ap Bia and that they were dug in and had no intention of leaving.”⁸

The other companies also once again found themselves in trouble. The 1st platoon of Charlie Company, while constructing a LZ, was attacked. Delta Company, advancing slowly through the “primeval forest,” exhausted from the rough terrain, stopped for lunch and a much needed rest.⁹ While they rested, they were attacked by another force of the NVA. A medevac helicopter, sent to help the wounded soldiers of Delta Company, was shot down, killing the soldier who was to be transported to the base hospital. Since it was too dangerous to send another medevac into the area, the soldiers of Delta Company had

to carry their wounded down back to a safer area. On their trek down the mountain, it began to rain, and there was no choice but to stop. The ground turned into a quagmire, and it was impossible to move forward. One of the wounded, the pilot of the downed helicopter, died on the way back to the base.

May 14th started like every other day. The artillery heavily bombed the face of Dong Ap Bia throughout the night, intensifying into the morning. The only difference this morning was the addition of Snake and Nape into the arsenal, a combination of high-drag bombs and napalm. Hopefully, this new combination would prove to be more successful in driving out the NVA. At 0800, Bravo and Charlie Companies moved out. Each time Bravo Company tried to advance, they were pushed back by giant claymore mines planted by the NVA. Charlie, however, advanced rapidly. Soon the NVA attacked the company. After thirty minutes of hard fighting, the Americans overran the second line of bunkers. Honeycutt was encouraged by this success, but it quickly disappeared. Within a span of minutes, enemy soldiers attacked the 3d platoon of Charlie and soon two soldiers were dead and fifteen were wounded. Honeycutt then refused a request by the lieutenant to withdraw from the mountain, and instead sent out Bravo and the 2d platoon of Charlie to aid the pinned-down 3d platoon.

Meanwhile, Lt. Boccia of Bravo Company was ordered to advance up the hill and attack enemy positions. He immediately sensed disaster. He felt that to go back up the hill was suicide, and he could imagine the death and devastation certain to occur if he did attack. When he told his men of the orders, the reaction was harsh and angry. “Jesus Christ!” One soldier yelled. “That fucking Honeycutt wants us all to get killed!”¹⁰ Fortunately for the soldiers and for Boccia, the attack was called off once the situation of

the 3d platoon of Charlie was reported. Boccia “felt suddenly like someone who had had a death sentence commuted at the last minute.”¹¹ Instead, he was ordered to go help Charlie.

Sfc. Louis Garza, in charge of 4th platoon of Bravo Company, was ordered to attack and secure a clearing. In response to the American attack, NVA snipers shot at the American soldiers with deadly accuracy. Garza called for his men to shoot into the trees and three NVA snipers fell to the ground. Garza and Captain Littnan realized that their attack was misguided. The NVA was shooting at the American soldiers from the trees, not from the bunkers and various spider holes as previously thought. Once Garza and Littnan ordered their soldiers to shoot randomly into the trees, many enemy snipers dropped and fell to the ground. Progress then proceeded very quickly.

Charlie Company, in a desperate state, tried to withdraw from their position on the hill. Once the soldiers started their withdrawal, the enemy took advantage of their weak position to attack. The soldiers of Charlie now had casualties added on to the soldiers wounded and dead from the attack of the day to carry back to the LZ. Captain Johnson, in charge of Charlie, was in shock. He could not believe the devastation and death that had afflicted his men. He had lost fifty percent of his men with this attack.

On May 15, Alpha and Bravo Companies were ordered to move toward the mountain. The NVA, thinking that they were about to ambush the American soldiers, instead ran straight into a “wall of rifle and machine-gun fire.”¹² Honeycutt then ordered fighter-bombers to attack the area with 20mm cannons, then followed with napalm and 500-pound bombs, then once again with cannon fire. After the fighter-bombers left, the

artillery fired on the area with hundreds of 105, 155, and 8-inch howitzer rounds. By the time the air attack was finished, an entire NVA company was dead.

Sfc. Garza led an assault on the ridge of Hill 937, and was repulsed by giant claymore mines planted by the NVA. Fighter-bombers attacked the area he marked so the claymores could be set off and the soldiers could continue the assault. Once the last of the mines were set off, Garza led a second assault into the area. After shooting at all the snipers hanging in the trees above, the soldiers broke into a clearing. Almost immediately, the Americans had to go for cover, hiding from machine-gun and rifle fire. The fight became very intense, and airstrikes were called in. Once again, the airstrikes missed the target and hit instead the American soldiers. The attack by the 4th platoon of Bravo Company was then counterattacked by the NVA.

The 1st platoon of Alpha Company started an attack to gain control of some NVA bunkers, but was soon forced to withdraw after half of the platoon was wounded. Honeycutt ordered Bravo to attack its area again, to which Lt. Boccia reacted with disbelief. After suffering high casualties, and having only fifteen men in his platoon, fewer men even in others, Boccia felt that an attack would be useless. He was proven right. After the hard day of fighting and the friendly-fire attack, the soldiers did not “have the heart for yet another fight through the knolls.”¹³ The soldiers began the withdrawal down from the mountain, a scene becoming too common.

May 16 was a day of waiting for the 1/506th to come to the aid of the 3/187th. Honeycutt thought that the 1/506th was to be able to make it to the positions of the 3/187th by that day to start an all-out attack on the hill. Unfortunately, the 1/506th was barely able to venture out farther than their NDPs. Honeycutt was forced to call off the attack

until the morning of May 17. The next day, however, the 1/506th made even less progress. The intelligence shop sent Honeycutt the concrete information he had wanted since the battle began. It was something he suspected but did not have confirmed: that the enemy unit on Dong Ap Bia was definitely the 29th NVA Regiment. To Honeycutt, it “codified what he had known all along, which is that his single battalion was considerably outnumbered by the enemy force on Dong Ap Bia.”¹⁴

On May 18th, the scheduled airstrikes for the morning went all wrong. Planes came in late and the gas attack actually landed in Alpha Company’s column. The wind also blew the gas clouds towards the Americans, causing the soldiers to gag and vomit. Alpha Company started the first assault and was promptly halted by intense NVA defense. Delta Company began their assault soon after Alpha stalled. However intense the fight, the soldiers were able to advance on the hill. Soon planes were sent in once the enemy position was identified and then they dropped napalm on the area. Because of the success of Delta Company, Alpha was able to restore their attack. In fifteen minutes the Americans had overrun one enemy bunker and were advancing onto the second. Although the 3/187th was advancing toward the mountain, the combined attack on the mountain by both the 3/187th and 1/506th was not going to occur. The 1/506th was not going to make it to the hill in time for the attack, to help the companies of the 3/187th already in position. But if the companies of the 3/187th were to withdraw, this would mean disaster for the soldiers. The NVA would have time to regroup and counterattack the withdrawing Americans. There was no choice but to continue the attack.

Aid finally reached Delta Company, which had run very low on supplies. Captain Johnson was ordered by Honeycutt to send some soldiers up to an area and to secure it.

Soon rain began to fall, and the shooting stopped almost immediately as the soldiers went for cover under their ponchos. The rain would not stop, and it was nearly impossible to advance, wading in three feet deep mud holes and trying to avoid flash floods. Honeycutt ordered a withdrawal, this time especially hard because they had come so close to taking the mountain.

The attack planned for the 19th of May was postponed until the 20th. Instead, Honeycutt used the extra day to finalize the plans for the attack on the 20th. The 1/506th was finally able to move into position, ready to attack from the western side of the mountain. They were able to overrun all the enemy bunkers and fight off the enemy well enough to consolidate their position, ready for the big attack on the 20th.

The preparatory fire for the morning of the 20th was the most intense yet so far. Fighter-bombers attacked the side of the mountain with high-drag bombs and napalm for two straight hours. Next, the artillery hit Dong Ap Bia for an hour and a half. At 1000, the strengthened American force, the four battalions of the 3/187th, 1/506th, 2/501st, and ARVN 2/3 started the attack. At first the attack by the 3/187th went uncontested, with no enemy in sight. The first enemy bunker was deserted, but the NVA attacked at the second enemy bunker. Using grenade launchers and recoilless rifles, the Americans were able to advance despite the heavy attack by the NVA.

Sp.4 Johnny Jackson, of the 3d platoon of Alpha Company, led a brave charge up the hill. He ran to the hill alone, which inspired the whole company to follow in his lead. Alpha was able to connect their defensive perimeter to the one of Charlie. Charlie 1/506th was able to make it up to the top of the hill, fighting from the nearby mountain called Hill 900. By 1350, all battalions were in prime position to begin the final push on

the mountain. At 1405, Honeycutt was ordered to send his 3/187th up to the mountain to flush the remaining two NVA platoons out off the mountain while the other three battalions blocked any attempt at enemy advance. What the men of the 3/187th found was complete destruction. “They moved through an apocalyptic, surreal landscape. All that remained to the triple-canopy jungle were rows of jagged tree trunks, surrounded by a muddy stew of splintered logs, bamboo, vines, and tree branches. Scattered everywhere were pith helmets, pieces of clothing, bloody bandages, blankets, AK47s, stick-handled grenades, and RPG and mortar rounds. North Vietnamese also littered the mountaintop.”¹⁵

The fight at Dong Ap Bia began to end at around 1655. The 3/187th continued to secure the area, “mopping-up” what was left of the 29th NVA regiment left on the hill. The official body count of the NVA was 633 enemy soldiers who perished in their fight to keep control of Hill 937. But this does not take into account the soldiers who were wounded and later died in nearby Laos, who were buried in crumbling bunkers, or who were buried in forgotten graves. The fight for control of Dong Ap Bia claimed the lives of 70 American soldiers and wounded 372 others.¹⁶ The scarred and blasted mountain on which the soldiers had fought for ten days was now referred to as Hamburger Hill “because they say this mountain turns men into hamburger.”¹⁷

While the battle raged in Vietnam, public opinion soon developed from indifference to anger. At first, the operations in the A Shau valley were just like any other incident in Vietnam. As the battle progressed, though, articles began to imply that the American soldiers should not be fighting there, that Operation Apache Snow was not fulfilling its task. After General Zais was replaced in command by Major General John

Wright who “ordered the position on the mountain abandoned by June 5,”¹⁸ the controversy over the battle of Hamburger Hill once again came into the forefront of the news. But why was the battle so controversial? Strictly from a military sense, the battle was a success. “In the face of superior numbers and murderous fire, they had rammed the enemy off Hamburger Hill and inflicted losses possibly ten times as heavy as they had suffered.”¹⁹ The soldiers had a mission, and they accomplished their objective. The public, though, scrutinized the objective. Why did the soldiers have to fight at Dong Ap Bia? Was Hill 937 so important that so many soldiers had to die? Why didn’t the military decide to use B-52 bombers, which would inflict more damage and reduce the need for foot soldiers? The battle of Hamburger Hill had widespread repercussions in government, the military, and the American public, all who asked the same final question which was printed on a sign on the top of Hill 937: Was it worth it?

A month after the battle was fought, President Richard Nixon announced his policy of Vietnamization. This would reduce the number of American soldiers fighting the war and increase the involvement of the South Vietnamese soldiers. At this time the amount of soldiers serving in Vietnam was at its peak, numbering 540,000 soldiers. Although not a direct result of the battle of Hamburger Hill, Nixon’s announcement came after a battle had been fought that was wrought with controversy. For many in the anti-war movement, “The battle for Hamburger Hill” was news that proved that the war was pointless, and U.S. involvement must stop. At the beginning of the war, public approval for the war was high. But after years of fighting and increasing casualties, Americans began to question the objectives of the war. President Nixon’s response to the growing anger and disillusionment toward the war was Vietnamization. The battle of Dong Ap

Bia may not have been the sole defining reason why Nixon began his policy of Vietnamization, but the events that happened in the A Shau valley certainly influenced him. According to Colonel Harry Summers, “Given the public and political reaction to Hamburger Hill, a change in war-fighting policy was not long in coming... ‘on June 19, just a month after the battle of Ap Bia Mountain, President Nixon cleared up any uncertainty there may have been about the existing policy...he is to conduct the war with a minimum of American casualties.’ ”²⁰

Elsewhere in the governmental arena, Senator Edward Kennedy spoke out against the war, in particular against Hamburger Hill. Taking the floor and speaking at a time reserved for comments, he stated “I feel that it is both senseless and irresponsible to continue sending our young men to their deaths to capture hills and positions that have no relation to ending this conflict.”²¹ Kennedy’s remarks inflamed many people. To say that the battle, and thus the war, was pointless and a waste of time and soldiers is to imply that the soldiers who fought died in vain. To many in the anti-war movement, his statement reflected the pervasive feeling that the war must end, and the dying must stop. To many, including the soldiers, what he said was indicative of the lack of support for the war, both public and governmental. But, as Lt. Robert Schmitz states, “It was about this time, though, that we began to realize what kind of support we had back home. I mean it’s one thing to have some hippie tell you you’re a war criminal and quite another to have a U.S. Senator- who is obviously a very powerful source- tell you that you’ve wasted the lives of the men serving under you instead of giving you the moral support which during these trying times would have been great to have.” Other soldiers had the same sentiments: that “he should have been shipped to Hanoi,” he “went to the top of my

all-time shit list,” and most reflective of how the soldiers felt about Kennedy, “What he said might have been true, but he was an outsider and had no right to get involved in the issue.”²²

“When the Army is committed the American people are committed, when the American people lose their commitment it is futile to try to keep the Army committed.”²³

The American public first read about the battle in the typical nondescript reports of the battles in Vietnam. “Allies Operating in the Ashau Valley,” stated a headline in the May 16 *New York Times*, in which the article explained the reason for the fighting, and listed casualties.²⁴ Nothing of controversial nature- yet. Then Jay Sharbutt wrote a report of the battle that soon electrified the public. What exactly was our soldiers doing in the A Shau Valley? His report, personal and descriptive, caught the attention of many Americans. “The paratroopers came down from the mountain, their green shirts darkened with sweat, their weapons gone, their bandages stained brown and red- with mud and blood. Many cursed Colonel Honeycutt, who sent three companies yesterday to take the mountain. They failed.”²⁵ Senator Kennedy, obviously influenced by these reports, then made his inflammatory statements. .Kennedy’s questioning of Hamburger Hill was only the beginning of a long investigation of the tactics used for the battle. What was the significance of Dong Ap Bia? Or the A Shau valley? The questioning raged on, about military tactics and moral issues.

As mentioned before, the battle was a success. The soldiers were told to find the enemy and eliminate it. Many soldiers, though, were not willing to fight during the battle. Combat refusals began to take form. “I ain’t goin’ up there!” One soldier said after being told of a rescue mission. Lt. Boccia, as stated earlier, felt that to fight at a certain point was suicide. The fighting was so intense that the battle looked hopeless, a lost cause. The soldiers then began to refuse to fight. “I wonder what would happen if we just refused to make the attack?” A soldier asked. “Do you think it would stop it?” “Nope,” replied another. “Not for a second. It wouldn’t change things a bit. All they’d do is fire our asses and bring in two more officers. And if they refused, they’d fire their asses too.”²⁶ Not knowing what exactly needed to be done, but following orders nonetheless, the soldiers released their hostilities and frustrations on their commanding officers. “I ain’t got time to talk on the radio,” Sullivan screamed. “Tell the captain to go fuck himself.” There are many incidents in the book Hamburger Hill that showed commanding officers giving orders and the officers on the field as a result angry and disgusted. The pointman in the RIF, for example, may be very hesitant about advancing, but is ordered to march forward, quicker, to gain ground. Although he may have a better view of the situation, he must follow the orders of his superior, regardless of the danger presented. Anger against a superior is natural, it is expected when put in such dangerous situations. But the difference here is that incidents of fragging, or killing superior officers, began to occur. Soldiers were so angry with Col. Honeycutt that they put a bounty of ten thousand dollars on his head.²⁷ This battle showed what could result from the frustration and anger at fighting a misunderstood and disliked war.

Many people, along with the soldiers questioned the tactics and the morals of the fight. Why didn't the military use B-52 bombers? Why didn't they order a withdrawal after realizing the strength of the NVA entrenched in the mountain? Dong Ap Bia was important for several reasons. Some soldiers had been building a road from Camp Eagle, the 101st headquarters, into the A Shau Valley. It was thought that the abandoned village of Tabat, which the mountain overlooked, was to be the "first permanent presence" of the South Vietnamese government in the valley.²⁸ The most important and immediate reason, though, was the steady stream of supplies that flowed from nearby Laos, which needed to be stopped.²⁹

All these explanations became a moot point, however, when the Americans ceded control of the hill on June 5, leaving it to the North Vietnamese. The June 18 issue of the *New York Times* states: "Foe Reported Back on Hamburger Hill."³⁰ The controversy that had died down once again became a front-page news item. "What is the point of taking a hill if you don't plan to keep it?" *The Chicago Tribune* asks. As a response, military sources state: "The battle for Hamburger Hill made sense because it was part of an operation designed to prevent what intelligence indicated were planned enemy attacks on the former imperial capital of Hue and on Da Nang."³¹ Overall, though, the theory that had been the force behind the initial attack on the A Shau Valley was put into question: that of maximum pressure. The main reason why the strategy of maximum pressure was used was because it took the fighting out of the populous cities and into the unpopulated areas of South Vietnam. Not only would give the Americans better knowledge of the NVA troops and supplies, but it would lessen the local support given to the Vietcong if the fighting was in the populous areas.³²

The main question both soldiers and civilians alike asked was not about maximum pressure, or of Vietnamization, but of the use of B-52 bombers. Many felt that the use of these fighter planes would have reduced the number of infantrymen used in the battle, and thus the number of casualties. “What’s wrong with cordoning off a place and pounding the hell out of it?” An American colonel asks.³³ According to Gen. Zais, “Bombing alone could never had flushed the enemy out of his bunkers.”³⁴ The bunkers were too deep to feel the effects of a B-52 raids- the NVA anticipated such an attack and prepared a defense for it. “Look, these gooks aren’t stupid,” a military intelligence officer said. “They know exactly how much damage an arc light B-52 raid does, how deep the bombs blow. They build their bunkers to withstand that. That’s what they’ve done out there.”³⁵ A captain who fought at Hamburger Hill states “To a lot of people the big thing was the fact that we didn’t use B-52s. But to do so, we would have had to pull back, and they would have gotten away. The NVA always tried to get as close as possible to us in order to negate our firepower.”³⁶ Many officers felt that B-52 bombers would be ineffective, and foot soldiers would be the only way make progress.

The questions about the tactics used in the war were fuel for the anti-war movement. How should a war be won if the tactics are not sound? Why should our boys be sent up a hill several times, many dying and getting wounded, only to leave the hill a few weeks later? In 1965, 64 percent of the American public supported the war in Vietnam. By 1967, more people, 46 percent, were opposed to the war. Even before Hamburger Hill, only 39 percent of the public still supported the war, and 52 percent thought that the war was a mistake. When the furor over Hamburger Hill started, it was over the amount of casualties, unusual for the war. There were few battles in that the

NVA had stood and fought. Instead they operated a sort of guerilla warfare- hit and run. The number of wounded and dead naturally was much higher when the enemy fought back more conventionally. An article in Life magazine heightened the anger about the high number of dead American soldiers. Titled "One Week's Dead," the article displayed pictures of 241 soldiers killed in one week. Following the pictures was an article called "I see death coming up the hill."³⁷ Although only a small portion of the article had a reference to Hamburger Hill, and only five pictured soldiers had died at the battle, the article implied that all 241 soldiers had fought and died in the A Shau Valley. As a result, the American public grew more disgusted at the war in Vietnam. This only strengthened the anti-war sentiment to say "either win the damn thing or get the hell out!"

In retrospect, the battle for Hamburger Hill is a reflection of the war in Vietnam itself. There is at first a clear objective, to eliminate the enemy and to accomplish the task. Then questions are asked about the policy and the tactics used to finish the fight. Public sentiment turns against the battle, and soon the soldiers are left fighting for what appears to be nothing. The soldiers at Hamburger Hill fought for a hill, to control a precious bit of land in South Vietnam, only to leave it to the very enemy they had taken it from. They lost their friends, their comrades, for what many felt for no reason at all. Many feel this about Vietnam, that the U.S. sent soldiers to fight a war which claimed several thousand lives, just to leave the country to the enemy they had resisted for so many years.

The battle for Hamburger Hill, Dong Ap Bia, or Hill 937- whatever it may be called- is forever imprinted on the minds of the soldiers who fought. To them the battle was not a waste, because why else did their comrades die? They fought honorably, and

followed orders, as was their job as soldiers. Pfc. Anthony Bresina spoke about his experience on Hamburger Hill and the effect it had on him, which will stay with him forever. “When I think of Hamburger Hill, I always think of Luther Morgan. He played the harmonica and had a beautiful voice. He was a good friend of mine in basic training and when we went over to help Charlie Company, I helped carry his body out. He was a helluva guy, and I dreamed about him a lot after the war. I used to also dream that I was getting off this plane and going to Vietnam for my second or third tour, and all these bastards who had figured a way out of it were standing there laughing at me. And when I finally got off the plane, there was somebody there telling me that I had to go up Hamburger Hill one more time.”³⁸

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- ⁹ Zaffiri, 132
- ¹⁰ Zaffiri, 152
- ¹¹ Zaffiri, 152
- ¹² Zaffiri, 175
- ¹³ Zaffiri, 187
- ¹⁴ Zaffiri, 205
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